

CEO COMMUNICATION AND THE FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS ADVISOR

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND EMERGING META-THEMES

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WHY A RESEARCH PROJECT ON CEO COMMUNICATION?

The CEO has increasing significance in an organization in terms of its communications. More than ever, the CEO is perceived not only as the voice of the organization, but also as its face, its whole identity, the embodiment of the organization. That calls for a deeper understanding of CEO communication and what kind of communications advice is needed – and which characteristics will be most essential for future communications advisors working with top management.

CEO IS THE CENTER OF ATTENTION...

The effects of this trend are multifold. The CEO is the center of attention in the organization. Internally, the CEO must set a clear direction and enable optimum engagement at a time when most companies and organizations are experiencing massive and radical transformation.

Externally, the CEO needs to navigate the increasing demands of being a responsible company, being compliant in an environment calling for more and more transparency, and meet the growing requirements of stakeholders and the media. The rise of digitization and the proliferation of platforms and channels have enabled a variety of stakeholder group to be more active and engaged, both internally and externally.

... BUT A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

This is a situation that most communicators and top managers recognize as being hugely important. However, the area of CEO communication is characterized by a lack of knowledge.

That is why we have tasked ourselves with improving our understanding of CEO communication and the future role of the trusted communications advisor.

WE DO NOT KNOW MUCH ABOUT THE CEO COMMUNICATIONS ADVISOR

Although much research and many consultants have found CEO communication to be extremely important (for instance Gaines-Ross 2003; Tregear 2017), the collaboration between CEO and advisor is not a well-established research area and very little empirical study has been carried out in this field.

SURVEYS

Surveys have been conducted on the role of the communications advisor and the demands facing him or her. However, these surveys only relate their findings to limited aspects of the practice in question. Furthermore, such investigations have primarily been undertaken in the US (for instance Arthur W. Page Society 2016, 2017), with only a few in Europe (for instance Zerfass et al. 2018; Falkheimer 2017; VMAGroup 2017) and in Denmark (Eiberg 2017; Meidell 2018).

'HOW TO' DOMINATES

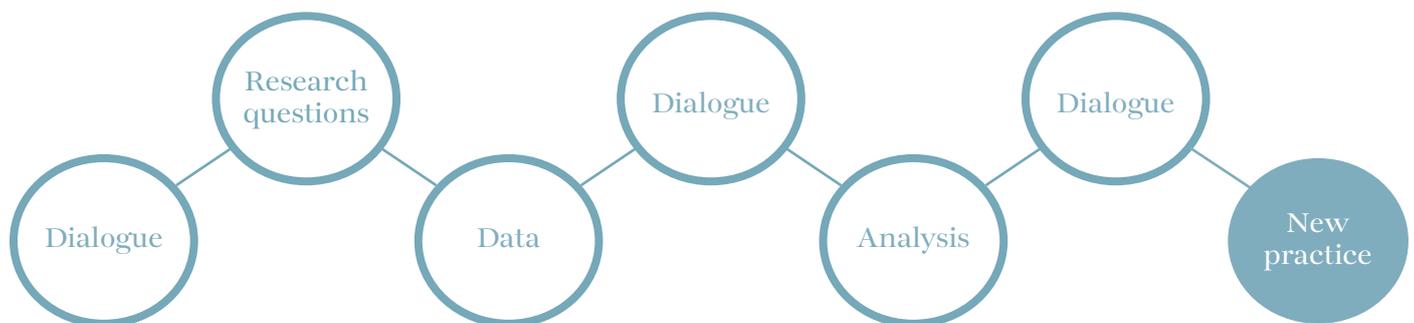
In addition, much of the remaining literature written in this field is anecdotal. Based on experienced advisors' professional practice, it consequently has a predominantly 'how to' perspective (for instance Maister et al. 2000). Moreover, the focus is very often directed towards management and business consultancy and not on communication consultancy specifically.

Thus, we have very little knowledge of how the CEO communications advisor thinks and acts in the professional practice, what the CEO expects from the communications advisor, and on the relationship between the CEO and his or her advisor when it comes to communication.

CO-CREATION AND THE NEW RESEARCH VALUE CHAIN

In this research project we apply a system of co-creation for research, through which we aim to actively collaborate with practitioners, create new knowledge and expand our understanding together. Our goal is to establish a knowledge-creating relationship where both practitioners and researchers are engaged in a joint endeavor to identify, analyze and develop solutions for relevant real-world problems and dilemmas.

We do this by involving practitioners in the new research value chain where both researchers and practitioners employ their respective knowledge when discussing research questions, data, analyses and future practices during workshops and meetings.



The new research value chain (Gravengaard 2017)

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

For our interview study, we have chosen two groups of respondents: trusted communications advisors and top managers (CEOs or equivalent). We are interested in creating new insights into their views on CEO communication and on the relationship between the trusted communications advisor and the CEO with a view to pointing out possibilities, dilemmas and best practices in their professional life.

The focal point of this white paper is on the communications advisors.

We have interviewed 37 experienced advisors with an average of 15 years' experience in advising top managers on matters of communication. This has resulted in 37 hours of interviews and more than 600 pages of transcriptions. The preliminary analyses are presented in this white paper.



THE EMERGING META-THEMES

We have recently completed the data collection for the first part of our analysis. This sheds light on the practice of CEO communication and the working relationship between C-level executives and their trusted communications advisors. Three meta-themes have emerged from the initial reading of the interview transcripts. They encapsulate essential perspectives that the communications professionals have put forward in the interviews.

THEME #1

UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESS

According to our findings, the ‘trusted communications advisor’ will only become so if he or she demonstrates a thorough understanding of the business (public or private). Especially when the relationship is new, an advisor must position him or herself as worthy of trust by demonstrating in practice that he or she understands the business and what the CEO needs. By producing timely and relevant communication deliverables that reflect a profound understanding of what is needed, the communication professional will gradually position him or herself as a trusted advisor or get to the table where strategic decisions are made.

NAVIGATE THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

One way for the communications professional to get this far is by demonstrating stakeholder management in practice. It is evident from our interviews that the trusted communications advisor is seldom the only advisor to the CEO. Heads of human resources or business development have equal access to advise the CEO on communication issues, as do executive assistants, PAs or chiefs of staff. In practice, the communication professional must be adept at operating in this organizational context and build coalitions with other advisors.

HIGH-PACED AND COMPLEX

According to our findings there is no doubt that CEO communication is business critical and growing in importance. The external communication of the CEO is followed and scrutinized by media, business analysts, customers, citizens, government representatives and numerous stakeholders. This is not new, but according to our findings, the pace of CEO communication has increased and the practice has become more complex because of the widespread use of social media. The latter has made the channel mix and communication processes much more dynamic and demanding, which poses new challenges and tasks for the trusted communications advisor.

NEED FOR CLEAR DIRECTION

Internally, the speed and frequency of transformative changes faced by most organizations in both the private and public sector make CEO communication more important than ever. CEO communication plays an important role when setting strategic directions, explaining the implications of change and showing the way for the next level of managers. According to our findings, internal perspectives on CEO communication display significant differences in levels of professional maturity with the advisors we have interviewed.

Another perspective is that the pressure from the board on most top executives to deliver results is rising and perhaps as a result of that, CEO tenure has been dropping significantly over the years. Today, more must be done in a shorter period of time and, from the trusted communications advisor's point of view, the CEO is in practice a transitional asset. The communications professional must therefore demonstrate the ability to quickly understand the agenda of the CEO and the need to deliver tangible short-term results.

COMPLEX STAKEHOLDER ARENA

But there's more. CEO communication must also address issues outside the borders of the organization. Corporate responsibility and corporate political activism, for example driven by the United Nations Member States' Sustainable Development Goals, require that CEOs communicate about new subjects. Assisting these leaders to communicate passionately and authentically about subjects such as inequality, migration or climate change raises the bar for the trusted advisor and adds to the increasing complexity of the role.

“You must demonstrate your professional communication skills. This is your license to operate. Then you have entered the room. But when you are in, you will fail fast if you are too persistent in your communication dogmatism... You must be pragmatic and be able to put aside your professional idealism ... The most important skill is business understanding. That you show you really understand what it takes for the company to become a success.”

Trusted communications advisor

THEME #2

MANAGING THE RELATIONSHIP

What characterizes the relationship between the CEO and the trusted communications advisor? In short, the relationship is both professional and personal but not private. The advisor's license to operate is subject to his or her possession of the required communication capabilities. Working closely over several years through multiple situations where much is at stake eventually results in a close relationship between the CEO and the advisor. It is a relationship built on the need for the CEO to constantly develop his or her communication skills and for the advisor to help the CEO develop this competence in practice.

PERSONALITY MATTERS

According to our findings, the relationship very often evolves over time to become more personal in character. Shared values – or good 'personal chemistry' – make it easier for both parties to understand each other, communicate effectively with little preparation time, and allow for the trusted communications advisor in practice to act on behalf of the CEO. He or she may be the person in the organization who knows the CEO best and can alert the CEO to oncoming opportunities as well as dangers.

TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

Trust, honesty and transparency are some of the words that the communication professionals in our study use to characterize their relationship with their CEO. There is, however, a distinction between personal and private that goes beyond semantics. For example, in one of the interviews, the trusted communications advisor explains clearly his conscious consideration of whether or not he should cross this apparently thin line and become friends with his CEO.

The relationship between the top manager and the advisor is often – and should be – close. Despite that – or perhaps because of it – the relationship is not managed like other organizational processes. It is in many ways an unmanaged relationship. It is also incident-driven. The CEO reaches out to the advisor when he or she finds him or herself in a situation where communication is critical.

“(The CEO) asked me how I perceived the company. Then I asked him if he wanted the diplomatic or the rough version of that story ... and already then, he wanted to know exactly what I thought. I told him about the challenges I saw in the company and it was on this occasion that he asked me if I would help him with his internal and external communication and the change process ... He said, ‘What I like about you is that you dare to disagree with me.’”

Trusted communications advisor

INCIDENTS AS A DRIVING FORCE

These situations include media interviews; meetings with analysts; the presentation of financial results; the launch of major organizational changes or new strategies; or quarterly town hall meetings where the CEO addresses all employees. These occasions are all excellent opportunities for the trusted communications advisor to demonstrate his or her value to the CEO. According to the findings, these occasions create “defining moments” where the CEO realizes the value of having a trusted communications advisor. Moreover, some of the interviewees describe how they actively attempt to create events in which they can position themselves as valuable advisors.

UNMANAGED MANAGEMENT OF THE RELATION

The unmanaged relationship described above is characterized by an absence of measurable goals, plans or strategies for top management communication. There was only a single interview in which the trusted advisor demonstrated that she had developed a formal plan with goals, activities and key performance indicators. From our perspective this a particularly interesting discovery in the light of the growing importance of CEO communication for both public and private organizations. It is also in sharp contrast to the widespread practice of performance-based business processes with measurable goals and planned activities. Despite the absence of plans, goals and key performance indicators, the communications professionals we interviewed have a perception that they are successful in their advisory role.

THEME #3

DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES

What does it require to become a trusted advisor within the field of CEO communication? It is no surprise that communication competencies give the trusted communications advisor a license to operate and access to the table where strategic decisions are made.

However, the interviewed advisors emphasize that in their experience the requirements within the field of CEO communication go beyond communication skills. The need to understand the business as discussed in Theme 1 requires competencies within organizational development, business economics and management. The communications advisor is expected to join the conversation.

TRUSTED ADVISOR AND EFFECTIVE OPERATOR

Communication practitioners have for decades discussed the transition from the role of communication producer to that of communications advisor. There is an underlying perception that the latter would be a desired career destination of most communication specialists. Yet our findings strongly challenge this perception and indicate that, on the contrary, many of the services that the trusted advisor provides for the CEO are very practical in nature.

They could include producing a PowerPoint presentation for an internal town hall meeting, writing a speech for an external audience or the Q&A before a media interview. These are all quite 'low-tech' deliverables, but they are nevertheless key to building the relationship between the CEO and the advisor; and they can eventually position the advisor in a situation where the CEO reaches out for strategic advice rather than tangible communications tasks. Efficient execution today paves the way for a strategic advisory role tomorrow.

RELATIONAL SKILLS

Another strong finding is that people skills are essential to the success of an advisor. We have previously discussed the importance to the advisor of understanding the agenda and objectives of the CEO and developing their professional and personal relationship. But what has become apparent in the interviews is that the advisor's deep understanding of the CEO is in fact a prerequisite to successfully advising him or her.

Relational leadership is key here, as advising the CEO often becomes quite personal: getting rid of bad communication habits, training the CEO in new communication skills and emphasizing the need for good communication in tense situations. It is essential for an advisor to know when to insist and when to bend. As we have discovered, a formal plan or strategy does not govern CEO communication. The trusted communication advisor must therefore draw on personal priorities, values and experience to demonstrate resilience in these critical situations. The pressure on CEOs to deliver tangible results fast inevitably spills over onto the advisor.

“We are communications professionals and from time to time you have ... to be able to contribute differently. (Your) business understanding ... should be demonstrated outside (your) own area. If you can do that ... if you are capable of saying, ‘We may have to look less at this and more at that because I think it would be valuable in this and this way’, then people listen to you in a different way than if you speak merely from your own professional area.”

Trusted communications advisor

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

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ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT OF NORDIC STUDIES AND LINGUISTICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

The Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics has research, education and communication as its primary purpose. It is home to 1600 students and 160 members of staff comprising teachers, researchers, librarians, student assistants and administrative staff. The Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics provides the setting for international research and education from BA to Ph.d. studies within language, literature, media, culture and gender studies.

ABOUT RELATIONSPeOPLE

RelationsPeople is a Danish, partner-owned communications consultancy. It works with clients in the private and public sector to improve their reputation, win market shares or change their organization. One of RelationsPeople's core competencies is leadership communication and over the past 10 years senior consultants have provided a broad portfolio of advisory services within leadership communication to top managers and management teams in Danish and international organizations.